THE CROWN WE NEVER CHOSE by SV Ray

Published by Margins Abound LLC

Prologue -- Silk Pressed Memory

The ferry to Dominica didn't ask questions. It never did. It simply cut through the Caribbean waters with the quiet confidence of something that had carried thousands of stories across the sea—some running toward, others away. The woman wrapped in linen and oversized sunglasses belonged to the latter category, though she carried herself with the poised dignity of someone who had chosen her exile rather than fled into it.

When she stepped off the weathered dock, it was as if the sea had gently released her—a secret whispered onto shore rather than shouted. The air wrapped around her immediately, thick and alive, spiced with turmeric, salt, and possibilities that hadn't existed in her previous life. Dominica didn't acknowledge her arrival with fanfare or suspicion. It simply went on breathing, a rhythm both foreign and strangely familiar.

The guesthouse register lay open, waiting. Her hand hovered over it for just a moment—muscle memory nearly betraying her with the flourish of a signature that had graced book covers and literary festival programs. Instead, she signed simply as 'V.' Nothing more. The letters small, slanted, practiced. A nod to simplicity—or perhaps erasure. The woman who owned the guesthouse studied her briefly, dark eyes missing nothing, but asking less.

"Welcome to Dominica," she said, sliding a key across worn mahogany. "Some find healing here, some adventure." A pause. "Some find neither. The island doesn't promise—it simply offers."

V nodded, grateful for the absence of questions.

Her hair was tied beneath a silk scarf, not out of shame but ritual—protection for a crown that had been both blessing and burden. The tight coils beneath were more than strands of keratin; they were a soft reminder of how many times her head had held stories long before they were ever written, how her grandmother's hands had once shaped those same coils while whispering histories too precious for books.

As she followed the path to her cottage, V realized that Dominica didn't feel like hiding. It felt like returning. Not to a place she knew—she'd never set foot on this island before—but to a rhythm. A pulse. Something that hummed beneath the volcanic soil and surfaced through the fingertips of women braiding hair beneath corrugated tin roofs, through the calloused hands of fishermen mending nets, through the practiced movements of vendors arranging mangoes into perfect pyramids.

The cottage was simple but deliberate: whitewashed walls, wooden shutters painted the blue of deep water, a small veranda overlooking green so intense it seemed to vibrate. She unpacked methodically—books first, then clothes, arranged with the precision of someone who had lived out of suitcases in hotel rooms across continents.

The space transformed, not into home, but into possibility.

V didn't plan to write again. That part of her had been loved, applauded, dissected, and ultimately hunted. She had left it behind like silk pressed hair caught in a sudden downpour—beautiful once, but far too delicate to survive in a world that demanded permanence, that consumed stories and their creators with equal fervor.

And yet.

Her fingers twitched when she passed a vendor selling hand-bound journals, leather covers embossed with patterns that reminded her of ancestral maps. Her eyes lingered on a mural where coiled roots shaped themselves into crowns, where women with faces like her grandmother's danced between worlds both seen and unseen. Something in her stirred—that quiet whisper that had guided her through thirty-six years and fourteen books. The voice that had once been her closest companion before the world grew too loud around it.

At dusk, she sat on her veranda and watched the sky turn the color of bruised plums. Night birds called to each other in a language she didn't understand but somehow recognized. The island breathed beneath her, steady and unconcerned with her presence or her absence.

She never said she was done.

Only that she'd be silent until something worth saying grew back—like hair after a decisive cut, like forests after fire, like truth after lies have finally exhausted themselves.

"We'll see," she whispered to the emerging stars, to the listening darkness, to whatever version of herself might be waiting to be rediscovered here.

It wasn't a promise. Not yet.

But it was a beginning.

Chapter 1 -- Parted Roots

The first thing V noticed about Dominica was the green. Not tourist brochure green—real green. Living green. The kind that breathed and pulsed and claimed everything it touched. Moss in the cracks of staircases. Leaves bigger than her forearms stretching toward the sun with unapologetic hunger. Trees that whispered rather than rustled, as if sharing secrets too ancient for human ears.

The second thing she noticed was how quickly her shoulders dropped away from her ears—a tension she hadn't realized she'd been carrying until it began to dissolve.

Her third morning on the island, V ventured beyond the quiet streets surrounding her guesthouse. She didn't try

to blend in. That wasn't possible with her height, her gait, the particular way the light caught in her eyes. But she knew how to stay quiet, how to occupy space like breath—not sound. It was a skill she'd perfected over years of literary festivals where her presence was simultaneously demanded and scrutinized, where her words were devoured but rarely digested.

Her lodging was tucked into the hillside, run by a woman named Eloise who spoke with the rhythm of calypso and the precision of a watchmaker. Eloise moved through the world as if she owned every inch she touched, not through entitlement but through certainty—a quality V had once possessed before fame had hollowed it into performance.

"The water pressure drops in the afternoon," Eloise had informed her on arrival, not as an apology but as a simple truth. "The best mangoes are at Solomon's stall—not Marcus's, no matter what he tells you. And if Madame Josephine offers to read your cards, say yes. She's right more often than the weather forecast."

V had nodded, grateful for information without intrusion. No one asked her real name. No one seemed to care. That was the beauty of an island that had seen too many travelers—missionaries, colonizers, tourists, exiles. You were only what you gave away, only what you chose to reveal.

She wandered most mornings, when the air was cool and the streets were quietly industrious. The markets buzzed

with jackfruit and cassava and gossip exchanged over stalls. She purchased small things—a ripe avocado, a hand-carved comb, a bag of spices that smelled like her grandmother's kitchen. Each transaction brief but human: a nod, a smile, the satisfying weight of coins changing hands.

V liked the hair braiders best—women with low stools set up beneath awnings, their hands fluent in a code as ancient as storytelling. Watching them work reminded her of old poetry, of rhythm without punctuation, of histories preserved through touch rather than text. Their fingers moved with practiced certainty, creating elaborate crowns and protective styles that honored both tradition and innovation.

"You watching like you hungry," observed a braider one morning, her hands never pausing in their intricate dance across her client's scalp.

V startled slightly, unused to being addressed directly. "I'm sorry—"

"No need," the woman interrupted, smiling. "Hair speaks its own truth. Yours is talking beneath that scarf. When you ready to listen, you come find me. I'm Celia. Tuesday through Saturday, right here."

V nodded, feeling strangely seen in a way Manhattan literary circles had never managed despite their relentless scrutiny. She moved on, heart beating a little faster, conscious of the weight of her own hair coiled beneath

her scarf—hair she hadn't truly tended to since leaving New York, since leaving behind the person she'd been crafted into becoming.

On her fifth day, she passed through a plaza lined with small shops and cafés. The morning sun cast golden light across weathered colonial buildings now repurposed into local businesses. Without thinking, she reached up to adjust her scarf, which had slipped slightly. The movement caught her reflection in a shop window—a woman both familiar and strange, her scarf revealing a hint of intricate braids glistening with coconut oil, her face somehow both guarded and open.

For a moment, she simply looked at herself, truly looked, for the first time in months. The woman in the reflection wasn't the carefully curated literary darling from book jackets, nor the hollow-eyed ghost who had fled New York after the scandal broke. She was somewhere in between—uncertain but not lost, quiet but not silenced.

A small smile curved her lips, surprising her with its authenticity.

Across the square, unnoticed, a man sat at a café table, sketchbook open before him. He had been studying the play of light across the plaza when the woman caught his attention—not her beauty, though she possessed that in abundance, but her presence. The way she carried herself as if holding something precious and fragile within. The sudden authenticity of her smile.

His pencil moved almost without conscious thought, capturing her outline on thick paper: the elegant curve of her neck, the careful way she touched her scarf, the juxtaposition of strength and vulnerability in her stance.

That man was Micah Santos, though V wouldn't learn his name until later. Just as she wouldn't learn that this casual sketch, born of an artist's instinct to capture moments of genuine human experience, would later become a painting. A painting that would change everything.

For now, all she noticed was the smell of tamarind in the air, the gentle weight of Dominica's humidity against her skin, and the slight curve of a smile she didn't know she still possessed. She continued her walk, each step a small reclamation.

Something about Dominica parted her gently—like roots being untangled after a long, still season underground. Not tearing, not breaking, but slowly, carefully separating what had become knotted. Creating space for breath, for life, for whatever might grow next.

V turned away from the plaza and headed toward the sound of waves breaking against ancient volcanic stone. The path led downward, toward a shoreline where the Caribbean Sea met the island with both tenderness and power—much like the stories she had once woven, before fear had silenced them.

Perhaps, she thought, she might listen again. Not today, perhaps not tomorrow.

But soon.

THE CROWN WE NEVER CHOSE

Prologue -- Silk Pressed Memory

The ferry to Dominica didn't ask questions. It never did. It simply cut through the Caribbean waters with the quiet confidence of something that had carried thousands of stories across the sea—some running toward, others away. The woman wrapped in linen and oversized sunglasses belonged to the latter category, though she carried herself with the poised dignity of someone who had chosen her exile rather than fled into it.

When she stepped off the weathered dock, it was as if the sea had gently released her—a secret whispered onto shore rather than shouted. The air wrapped around her immediately, thick and alive, spiced with turmeric, salt, and possibilities that hadn't existed in her previous life. Dominica didn't acknowledge her arrival with fanfare or suspicion. It simply went on breathing, a rhythm both foreign and strangely familiar.

The guesthouse register lay open, waiting. Her hand hovered over it for just a moment—muscle memory nearly betraying her with the flourish of a signature that had graced book covers and literary festival programs. Instead, she signed simply as 'V.' Nothing more. The letters small, slanted, practiced. A nod to simplicity—or perhaps erasure. The woman who owned the guesthouse studied her briefly, dark eyes missing nothing, but asking less.

"Welcome to Dominica," she said, sliding a key across worn mahogany. "Some find healing here, some adventure." A pause. "Some find neither. The island doesn't promise—it simply offers."

V nodded, grateful for the absence of questions.

Her hair was tied beneath a silk scarf, not out of shame but ritual—protection for a crown that had been both blessing and burden. The tight coils beneath were more than strands of keratin; they were a soft reminder of how many times her head had held stories long before they were ever written, how her grandmother's hands had once shaped those same coils while whispering histories too precious for books.

As she followed the path to her cottage, V realized that Dominica didn't feel like hiding. It felt like returning. Not to a place she knew—she'd never set foot on this island before—but to a rhythm. A pulse. Something that hummed beneath the volcanic soil and surfaced through the fingertips of women braiding hair beneath corrugated

tin roofs, through the calloused hands of fishermen mending nets, through the practiced movements of vendors arranging mangoes into perfect pyramids.

The cottage was simple but deliberate: whitewashed walls, wooden shutters painted the blue of deep water, a small veranda overlooking green so intense it seemed to vibrate. She unpacked methodically—books first, then clothes, arranged with the precision of someone who had lived out of suitcases in hotel rooms across continents. The space transformed, not into home, but into possibility.

V didn't plan to write again. That part of her had been loved, applauded, dissected, and ultimately hunted. She had left it behind like silk pressed hair caught in a sudden downpour—beautiful once, but far too delicate to survive in a world that demanded permanence, that consumed stories and their creators with equal fervor.

And yet.

Her fingers twitched when she passed a vendor selling hand-bound journals, leather covers embossed with patterns that reminded her of ancestral maps. Her eyes lingered on a mural where coiled roots shaped themselves into crowns, where women with faces like her grandmother's danced between worlds both seen and unseen. Something in her stirred—that quiet whisper that had guided her through thirty-six years and fourteen books. The voice that had once been her closest companion before the world grew too loud around it.

At dusk, she sat on her veranda and watched the sky turn the color of bruised plums. Night birds called to each other in a language she didn't understand but somehow recognized. The island breathed beneath her, steady and unconcerned with her presence or her absence.

She never said she was done.

Only that she'd be silent until something worth saying grew back—like hair after a decisive cut, like forests after fire, like truth after lies have finally exhausted themselves.

"We'll see," she whispered to the emerging stars, to the listening darkness, to whatever version of herself might be waiting to be rediscovered here.

It wasn't a promise. Not yet.

But it was a beginning.

Chapter 1 -- Parted Roots

The first thing V noticed about Dominica was the green. Not tourist brochure green—real green. Living green. The kind that breathed and pulsed and claimed everything it touched. Moss in the cracks of staircases. Leaves bigger than her forearms stretching toward the sun with unapologetic hunger. Trees that whispered rather than rustled, as if sharing secrets too ancient for human ears.

The second thing she noticed was how quickly her shoulders dropped away from her ears—a tension she hadn't realized she'd been carrying until it began to dissolve.

Her third morning on the island, V ventured beyond the quiet streets surrounding her guesthouse. She didn't try to blend in. That wasn't possible with her height, her gait, the particular way the light caught in her eyes. But she knew how to stay quiet, how to occupy space like breath—not sound. It was a skill she'd perfected over years of literary festivals where her presence was simultaneously demanded and scrutinized, where her words were devoured but rarely digested.

Her lodging was tucked into the hillside, run by a woman named Eloise who spoke with the rhythm of calypso and the precision of a watchmaker. Eloise moved through the world as if she owned every inch she touched, not through entitlement but through certainty—a quality V had once possessed before fame had hollowed it into performance.

"The water pressure drops in the afternoon," Eloise had informed her on arrival, not as an apology but as a simple truth. "The best mangoes are at Solomon's stall—not Marcus's, no matter what he tells you. And if Madame Josephine offers to read your cards, say yes. She's right more often than the weather forecast."

V had nodded, grateful for information without intrusion. No one asked her real name. No one seemed to

care. That was the beauty of an island that had seen too many travelers—missionaries, colonizers, tourists, exiles. You were only what you gave away, only what you chose to reveal.

She wandered most mornings, when the air was cool and the streets were quietly industrious. The markets buzzed with jackfruit and cassava and gossip exchanged over stalls. She purchased small things—a ripe avocado, a hand-carved comb, a bag of spices that smelled like her grandmother's kitchen. Each transaction brief but human: a nod, a smile, the satisfying weight of coins changing hands.

V liked the hair braiders best—women with low stools set up beneath awnings, their hands fluent in a code as ancient as storytelling. Watching them work reminded her of old poetry, of rhythm without punctuation, of histories preserved through touch rather than text. Their fingers moved with practiced certainty, creating elaborate crowns and protective styles that honored both tradition and innovation.

"You watching like you hungry," observed a braider one morning, her hands never pausing in their intricate dance across her client's scalp.

V startled slightly, unused to being addressed directly. "I'm sorry—"

"No need," the woman interrupted, smiling. "Hair speaks its own truth. Yours is talking beneath that scarf. When

you ready to listen, you come find me. I'm Celia. Tuesday through Saturday, right here."

V nodded, feeling strangely seen in a way Manhattan literary circles had never managed despite their relentless scrutiny. She moved on, heart beating a little faster, conscious of the weight of her own hair coiled beneath her scarf—hair she hadn't truly tended to since leaving New York, since leaving behind the person she'd been crafted into becoming.

On her fifth day, she passed through a plaza lined with small shops and cafés. The morning sun cast golden light across weathered colonial buildings now repurposed into local businesses. Without thinking, she reached up to adjust her scarf, which had slipped slightly. The movement caught her reflection in a shop window—a woman both familiar and strange, her scarf revealing a hint of intricate braids glistening with coconut oil, her face somehow both guarded and open.

For a moment, she simply looked at herself, truly looked, for the first time in months. The woman in the reflection wasn't the carefully curated literary darling from book jackets, nor the hollow-eyed ghost who had fled New York after the scandal broke. She was somewhere in between—uncertain but not lost, quiet but not silenced.

A small smile curved her lips, surprising her with its authenticity.

Across the square, unnoticed, a man sat at a café table, sketchbook open before him. He had been studying the play of light across the plaza when the woman caught his attention—not her beauty, though she possessed that in abundance, but her presence. The way she carried herself as if holding something precious and fragile within. The sudden authenticity of her smile.

His pencil moved almost without conscious thought, capturing her outline on thick paper: the elegant curve of her neck, the careful way she touched her scarf, the juxtaposition of strength and vulnerability in her stance.

That man was Micah Santos, though V wouldn't learn his name until later. Just as she wouldn't learn that this casual sketch, born of an artist's instinct to capture moments of genuine human experience, would later become a painting. A painting that would change everything.

For now, all she noticed was the smell of tamarind in the air, the gentle weight of Dominica's humidity against her skin, and the slight curve of a smile she didn't know she still possessed. She continued her walk, each step a small reclamation.

Something about Dominica parted her gently—like roots being untangled after a long, still season underground. Not tearing, not breaking, but slowly, carefully separating what had become knotted. Creating space for breath, for life, for whatever might grow next.

V turned away from the plaza and headed toward the sound of waves breaking against ancient volcanic stone. The path led downward, toward a shoreline where the Caribbean Sea met the island with both tenderness and power—much like the stories she had once woven, before fear had silenced them.

Perhaps, she thought, she might listen again. Not today, perhaps not tomorrow.

But soon.

The Crown We Never Chose

By S. V. Wray

Prologue -- Silk Pressed Memory

The ferry to Dominica didn't ask questions. It never did. It simply cut through the Caribbean waters with the steady rhythm of something that had seen countless arrivals and departures—some permanent, some fleeting, some suspended in that curious limbo of the intentionally temporary.

V stepped off the vessel like a woman emerging from her own shadow. The gangplank creaked beneath her sandals—Italian leather, expensive, at odds with her carefully cultivated anonymity. Years of habit had taught her how to disappear within plain sight: linen wrapped

loosely around her frame, wide-brimmed hat tilted at the precise angle to obscure her face, oversized sunglasses completing the armor.

The air embraced her immediately—thick and sultry, a perfume of turmeric, salt, overripe mangoes, and something indefinable that belonged uniquely to this place. Dominica didn't acknowledge her arrival with fanfare. It simply went on breathing, existing, pulsing with a vitality that seemed to rise from the volcanic soil itself.

At the guest house—a weathered colonial structure repurposed with careful respect for its bones—she signed the register with a single letter: 'V.' The pen hesitated for just a moment, muscle memory nearly betraying her with the looping curves of a signature that had graced hundreds of book jackets, thousands of autographs. But she caught herself. The 'V' remained small, slanted, deliberate. A nod to simplicity—or perhaps erasure.

Her hair remained hidden beneath a silk scarf, not out of shame but ritual. Protection. A generation of Black women had taught her this: sometimes the crown must rest. Sometimes it must be shielded from grasping hands and hungry eyes. Her scalp still remembered the years of chemical straightening, the hot combs, the hours spent in salon chairs while publicists discussed her "image" as if her hair were public property rather than the stories it had held long before anyone knew her name.

Dominica didn't feel like hiding, though. Strangely, it felt like returning. Not to a place she knew—she had never set foot on the island before—but to a rhythm. A pulse. Something that hummed beneath the soil and surfaced through the fingertips of women braiding hair beneath corrugated tin roofs, through the calloused hands of fishermen mending nets, through the easy laughter of children racing barefoot along volcanic beaches.

V unpacked methodically, arranging the sparse belongings she'd allowed herself: cotton dresses, a worn journal (empty), a stack of books (none her own), and a single photograph face-down in the suitcase lining. She didn't turn it over. Some ghosts were better left undisturbed.

The truth was, V hadn't planned to write again. That part of her had been loved, applauded, dissected, and hunted in equal measure. She had left it behind like silk-pressed hair caught in a sudden downpour—beautiful once, but far too delicate to survive in a world that demanded permanence. Words had made her a fortune, then made her a target, then made her invisible in the most visible way possible.

Yet her fingers twitched when she passed a vendor selling hand-bound journals, the pages thick and creamy, promising patience for whatever might bleed onto them. Her eyes lingered on a mural painted across a crumbling wall—coiled roots shaped like crowns, stretching toward a sky rendered in shades she couldn't name. Something in her stirred, like soil after the first rain.

She never said she was done. Only that she would remain silent until something worth saying grew back.

That night, she slept with the windows open, the mosquito netting billowing like gossamer around her bed. The island's symphony filtered through—tree frogs calling, distant drums, the persistent whisper of waves against volcanic shores. In that liminal space between waking and dreaming, words began to form, unbidden.

Not a story. Not yet.

Just the possibility of one.

Chapter 1 -- Parted Roots

The first thing V noticed about Dominica was the green. Not the sanitized, cultivated green of resort landscaping, but real green—a riotous explosion of life that seemed to breath with ancient lungs. Moss growing in the cracks of concrete staircases. Leaves bigger than her forearms, their surfaces slick and reflective in the morning light. Trees that didn't so much rustle as whisper, exchanging secrets that had survived hurricanes and colonization with equal resilience.

She didn't try to blend in. That wasn't possible. Her carefully neutral clothing, her measured pace, her watchful silence—all marked her as an outsider. But she knew how to stay quiet, how to occupy space like breath rather than sound. It was a skill she'd perfected in

boardrooms where men interrupted her, at literary festivals where readers believed they owned pieces of her soul, in the shadowed corners of her former life where privacy became more precious than the advance on her last book.

Her lodging was tucked into the hillside, a restored plantation outbuilding that had been transformed into something softer, its dark history acknowledged through preservation rather than erasure. It was run by a woman named Louisa who spoke with the rhythm of calypso and the precision of a watchmaker. She served fresh passionfruit at breakfast and asked no questions beyond, "You need extra towels today?"

No one asked her real name. No one cared. That was the beauty of an island that had seen too many travelers—explorers, conquerors, tourists, refugees. You were only what you gave away. The rest remained yours alone.

She wandered most mornings, when the heat hadn't yet reached its peak and the markets buzzed with jackfruit and cassava and gossip. She navigated by instinct rather than map, allowing her feet to lead while her mind drifted. At home—no, her previous home—every moment had been scheduled, optimized, commodified. Here, time expanded and contracted according to natural rhythms rather than publishing deadlines.

She liked watching the hair braiders best—women with low stools positioned beneath awnings, their hands moving with the fluid precision of seasoned artists. Their

fingers spoke a language of loops and twists that reminded her of old poetry, of rhythm without punctuation, of stories passed through touch rather than text. Sometimes she lingered, observing the transformations as customers emerged with intricate architectural masterpieces crowning their heads.

One morning, she passed a plaza where sunlight slanted between buildings, creating pools of gold on weathered cobblestones. She caught her reflection in a shop window and paused. Her scarf had slipped, revealing a braid crown glistening with coconut oil—the work of her own hands in the predawn light. She reached to adjust it, unaware of the man across the square who had stopped mid-stride, his gaze fixed on her silhouette, his charcoal pencil already moving across the napkin he'd pulled from his pocket.

That man was Micah, though she wouldn't learn his name until later. All she registered was a flicker of movement in her peripheral vision, quickly dismissed as she continued on her way.

She navigated the steep streets toward the market, where she purchased a small bag of tamarind candies and a handful of star apple. The vendor—a woman with silver threads running through her dreadlocks—handed her the change with an appraising look.

"You staying long?" she asked.

V hesitated. "I haven't decided."

The woman nodded as if this was both expected and understood. "Islands have their own time," she said. "You stay until it tells you to go."

V turned the words over as she walked back to her lodging, savoring a tamarind candy that balanced sweet and sour in perfect tension. The taste unraveled a memory: her grandmother's kitchen, summer afternoons, stories told while hands remained busy shelling peas or kneading dough. The slight curve of a smile formed on her lips—one she didn't know she still possessed.

Something about Dominica parted her gently—like roots being untangled after a long, still season underground. Not violently, not completely, but enough to let air and light reach places that had been compressed for too long. She felt herself breathing differently, as if her lungs were remembering their full capacity.

That night, she wrote a single line in the journal she'd purchased impulsively from a vendor near the ferry dock:

I came here to disappear, but something else is happening instead.

Then she closed the book, ran her fingers across its leather cover, and placed it on the nightstand. The words weren't important—not yet. What mattered was the act itself: the pen in her hand, moving with purpose for the first time in months.

Outside her window, the island continued its ancient conversation with the sky, indifferent to her small awakening yet somehow making space for it all the same.

Chapter 2 -- The First Braid

The salon wasn't advertised. No storefront sign, no business cards, no Instagram account carefully curated with before-and-after transformations. It was understood, passed through whispers and nods and the kind of community knowledge that algorithms could never quite capture.

After a week of quiet observation and careful questions, V found it tucked behind a fruit stall and shaded by a massive breadfruit tree. The space defied conventional architecture—part courtyard, part covered porch, walls that seemed more suggestion than structure. It buzzed with life distinct from the careful sterility of high-end salons she'd frequented in her previous life. Here, women laughed without restraint, children dozed on laps or played between chairs, and the radio drifted between news, music, and static without anyone rushing to adjust it. The air was perfumed with shea butter, hibiscus tea brewing in a pot, and the subtle chemistry of hair products that promised moisture and hold in equal measure.

V lingered at the periphery, absorbing the rhythm of the place before entering. When she finally stepped into the

shared space, conversations didn't halt dramatically as they might have in a glossy Manhattan salon where celebrity sightings warranted immediate social media documentation. Instead, she received casual acknowledgments—a few nods, a "good morning," a child's curious stare.

She didn't speak much. Instead, she pointed to a photo on the wall—intricate cornrows that formed a crown-like pattern, both elegant and practical. The lead braider—a woman with impossible posture and hands that looked as if they contained all the world's patience—nodded, gesturing for V to sit in a chair that had been patched and re-patched but remained inexplicably comfortable.

"You tender-headed?" the braider asked, her accent melodic but her question direct.

"Not anymore," V replied.

It wasn't entirely true. Her scalp remembered everything—every chemical burn from relaxers, every too-tight ponytail required for photoshoots, every stylist who'd pulled and twisted while discussing her as if she weren't present. But she'd learned how to sit still through pain. Through pulling. Through the holding of stories in silence while hands worked at creating the proper "image" for book jackets and television appearances.

The woman—who introduced herself simply as Elise—began working. Her fingers moved with grace and command, partitioning V's hair with a precision that felt

almost mathematical before threading stories and legacy into each plait. The process wasn't simply about beauty or style; it was history, technique, resistance, ritual. Each tug against V's scalp reminded her of childhood Sundays, of her mother oiling her hair before church, of later years when publicists and photographers argued over which curl pattern to leave loose, of fans who sometimes asked to touch the back of her head as if her hair were public art.

V closed her eyes. Let herself be handled. In this space, at least, the hands working on her crown understood its significance beyond aesthetics.

"You're not from here," Elise observed after twenty minutes of comfortable silence.

"No."

"But you're looking for something."

V opened her eyes, meeting Elise's gaze in the mirror. "What makes you say that?"

Elise's hands never paused in their rhythmic work. "People come to Dominica for three reasons. To see the nature, to find healing, or to lose themselves." Her lips curved slightly. "You don't have the camera of the first or the desperation of the second."

V said nothing, but something in her expression must have confirmed Elise's assessment.

"The island is good for losing old selves," Elise continued. "But even better for finding new ones."

The conversation drifted into comfortable silence again, punctuated only by the radio's shifting soundtrack and occasional instructions for V to tilt her head. Three hours passed like meditation. When it was done, the mirror revealed a crown of tight, even braids. Clean lines. Sharp parts. Something both protective and proud that framed her features in a way that felt both ancient and immediate.

"You look like someone important," Elise said as V handed over payment—more than the asked price, but less than would create uncomfortable distance.

"Not anymore," V answered, and meant it.

She left with her head higher than when she arrived, the weight of the braids a comforting reminder of substance. On the walk back, she passed the same plaza where she'd adjusted her scarf days earlier. This time, she noticed the small gallery on the corner, its doors open to catch the afternoon breeze.

Micah stood outside, one shoulder leaning against the doorframe, eyes on his sketchpad, charcoal-stained fingers moving with the same focused intensity she'd witnessed in Elise's hands. He looked up as she passed, and their eyes met.

The recognition in his gaze was immediate—not of her name or former identity, but of her form. He had seen her before, had captured something of her essence already. In that second of connection, she knew something had been taken—but for the first time in years, the knowledge didn't fill her with dread.

Chapter 3 -- Leave-In

The gallery was small, but it breathed with the same organic rhythm V had come to associate with Dominica itself. Unlike the sterile white cubes of New York or the ostentatious display spaces of Los Angeles, this place embraced its environment rather than attempting to create clinical separation from it.

Its walls were a canvas of textures beyond the artwork they displayed—charcoal sketches on handmade paper, oil paintings on reclaimed driftwood, ink drawings on cloth that had been stretched and mounted but still retained the memory of its previous life. Micah moved through the space barefoot, his steps making no sound as he spoke softly with an older couple about a series he'd created using coffee grounds and river mud collected after the last significant rainfall.

V wandered without announcing herself, letting the art speak while she listened. She moved past landscapes that captured Dominica's impossible green, portraits of locals whose eyes held centuries, abstract pieces that seemed to vibrate with the island's underlying energy. She stopped

before one work that commanded her attention—thick black lines twisted into coils, like hair drawn from memory rather than observation. No faces. No explicit context. Just a slow story told in loops and negative space.

"That one's called 'Inheritance,'" Micah said, suddenly beside her though she hadn't heard him approach.

"It looks like a fight," she observed, studying the tension in the lines.

"Or a crown." His voice carried no correction, only perspective.

Their eyes met again, and this time V held his gaze longer, taking in the details of his face. He was younger than she'd initially thought—maybe early thirties to her late thirties—with eyes that reflected careful observation without intrusion. His dark skin contrasted with a single patch of vitiligo near his left temple, which he'd incorporated into his appearance rather than attempted to conceal.

"You live here?" he asked.

"For now." The phrase had become her standard response, noncommittal yet not untrue.

He smiled, revealing a slight gap between his front teeth that somehow completed rather than disrupted the

harmony of his features. "Then you're lucky. The island doesn't let everyone stay."

She almost asked what he meant by that, but the question felt too intimate, too close to conversations she wasn't ready to have. Instead, she nodded at the piece again.

"It reminds me of something," she admitted.

"That means it's working." The simplicity of his response carried no pretension, none of the affected artistic philosophy she'd grown accustomed to in creative circles where meaning was often obscured by theory.

V completed her circuit of the gallery without purchasing anything. Micah didn't press, didn't offer business cards or exhibition catalogues or mailing list sign-ups. The commercial aspect of art seemed secondary here, perhaps even tertiary to the creation and connection.

When she stepped outside again, the air felt different against her skin—like moisture held at the scalp after a deep conditioning treatment, waiting to be sealed in by oil or butter. The sensation was subtle but unmistakable: something had penetrated a barrier she hadn't realized was still in place.

She touched her braids absentmindedly as she walked back toward her lodging, feeling their neat patterns beneath her fingertips.

Leave it in, she thought. *Let it soften what's still brittle underneath.*

That night, she sat on the small balcony outside her room, watching lightning flicker silently over distant mountains. Her journal lay open on her lap, and this time she wrote more than a single line:

The island speaks a language of roots. Everything here grows from something deeper than what's visible. I came with nothing but endings, yet beginnings keep finding me anyway.

Chapter 4 -- Washed & Hung

It rained that afternoon, the kind of rain that announced itself with authority and settled in for proper conversation. Droplets the size of earrings struck tin roofs and cobblestones, creating a percussion that sounded like enthusiastic applause after a particularly moving reading. V had ventured out for fresh bread and found herself caught in the deluge halfway back to her lodging.

She had no umbrella, but she didn't rush. Her dress—a simple cotton shift—clung to her frame, and her scarf was tied loose enough that mist touched the edges of her braids. There was something liberating about surrendering to natural forces after years of controlling every variable, every appearance, every word.

She ducked into a covered alley where architecture created a brief respite—a narrow passage where colonial structures met modern necessity with grudging compromise. Vines wrapped around rusted support poles like bracelets adorning a wrist. Micah was already there, leaning against the wall, his sketchbook open on his knee, its pages damp at the corners.

He looked up as she entered the shared shelter, recognition immediate but undemanding.

"Looks like the island's applauding something," he observed, nodding toward the rain that continued its enthusiastic descent.

V smiled faintly. "Or warning us."

They stood in companionable silence for a moment, letting the rain frame the world beyond their temporary sanctuary. The air smelled of petrichor and possibility—green things being forgiven for their wildness, stones remembering what they were before compression.

"You ever get tired of being unknown?" he asked, the question emerging without preamble.

She paused, considering not just the question but its layered implications. "No," she finally answered. "I got tired of being known."

His eyes held hers for a moment, and she saw that he understood the distinction was significant without

needing to know why. He turned the page of his sketchbook, revealing a rough outline of her captured in quick, confident strokes. The figure was unmistakably her—hair wrapped in fabric, posture poised between approach and retreat, hands folded like a woman waiting on fate rather than rushing to meet it.

"I don't need to keep it," he said quietly. "Just wanted to remember the silhouette."

"Memory's a kind of possession," she observed.

He looked up from the sketch. "So is letting someone in."

The rain slowed, its rhythm shifting from declaration to meditation. V stepped back into it anyway, her scarf catching the breeze as she moved. Micah didn't follow, but she felt his gaze as she navigated the slick cobblestones back toward the road.

By the time she reached her guesthouse, her clothes were soaked through. She hung them carefully by the open window, watching droplets trace down cotton like thoughts through silence—following paths of least resistance toward inevitable conclusions.

She remembered an old quote from her publisher, delivered over expensive wine in a restaurant where the lighting had been designed to make everyone look successful: "No one buys soft stories, Simone. They want thunder and lightning. They want devastation. They

want to feel wrecked." At the time, she'd nodded, accepting the wisdom of someone who understood the market better than she understood herself.

But this island? This moment?

It was soft—the rain, the shelter, the sketch, the conversation. The gentle persistence of things growing without permission or deadline. The patient return of a self she'd abandoned in pursuit of what others defined as success.

And she finally understood the strength of it—the power in what bends rather than breaks, what absorbs rather than deflects, what transforms through yielding rather than resistance.

That night, she wrote again:

The crown we never chose becomes the one we finally wear with grace. Not because it was given, but because we learned how to carry it.

The Crown We Never Chose

By S. V. Wray

Chapter 5 -- Co-Wash

They began to orbit each other like twin stars caught in mutual gravity—not colliding, not combining, but existing in a delicate choreography of presence and distance that defined their days on the island.

V would walk the market paths a little slower, lingering over displays of spice and fabric with a newfound patience. Micah would position himself outside his gallery longer than strictly necessary, sketching passers-by while secretly hoping for a glimpse of her silhouette against the slanting Caribbean sun. Their words remained careful, measured like ingredients in a precise recipe, but their silences had softened, becoming spaces of possibility rather than barriers.

She never told him who she was. The name that had once graced bestseller lists and literary festivals remained locked behind her teeth, a secret kept not out of deception but self-preservation. He never asked directly, though curiosity sometimes flickered across his features when she referenced books or authors with the intimate knowledge of someone who had dwelled inside that world rather than merely visited it.

Instead, their conversations drifted through safer territories. Micah spoke of textures and techniques—how he'd learned to mix acrylic with clay harvested from Dominica's volcanic slopes to capture depth that flat pigment alone couldn't achieve, how hair wasn't simply a

line to be drawn but a landscape to be mapped with its own topography and weather patterns. V listened with genuine fascination, recognizing in his approach to art the same obsessive attention to detail she had once brought to the architecture of her novels.

"The thing about island light," he explained one afternoon as they sat beneath the shade of a mango tree, watching sunlight dapple the pavement, "is that it doesn't just illuminate—it transforms. The same subject looks completely different at dawn versus midday versus twilight. You have to capture all those versions to tell the whole truth."

"Perhaps that's why people are so often misunderstood," V observed. "We only see them in one light, at one moment, and mistake that glimpse for the complete story."

Micah studied her for a moment before responding. "Is that why you prefer the shadows? To remain unread?"

The question skated dangerously close to territories they'd silently agreed to avoid, but V found herself answering anyway. "Some books aren't meant for every library."

One humid afternoon, when the air hung heavy with impending rain and the streets had emptied in anticipation, Micah invited her inside the gallery before opening hours. The space was dim, windows shuttered

against the approaching storm, creating an intimacy that felt both sanctuary and confession booth.

In the center of the main room, a canvas stood on an easel, deliberately facing the wall like a secret not yet ready to be shared.

"I want to show you something," he said, his voice carrying unusual tension. "Something I've been working on."

He turned the canvas slowly, with the reverence of someone unveiling not just art but truth. The painting was her—or rather, a version of her captured through his particular vision. Her braids glinted with subtle highlights of blue and copper, her profile wrapped in the quiet tension and elegance she maintained even in supposed relaxation. But the background wasn't scenery, wasn't the typical island landscape that tourists purchased to commemorate their temporary escape. Instead, the space behind and around her was composed entirely of hair—braided, twisted, coiled into waves that resembled ocean swells, creating a universe where she existed both as subject and context, figure and ground.

V stepped back, her intake of breath audible in the silent room. "You painted me."

"I painted a moment," he corrected gently. "One I couldn't let rinse away."

Her voice went quiet, stripped of its careful neutrality. "You can't show this."

Micah blinked, genuine confusion replacing his anticipation. "Why not?"

"Because someone will recognize me."

The statement hung between them—her first indirect acknowledgment that she was someone who could be recognized, someone who had reasons to avoid recognition.

"That's the point of beauty," he said, gesturing toward the canvas. "To be seen."

"No," she whispered, her hand moving unconsciously to touch her braids. "To be safe."

The tension hung like moisture in a closed room, dense with unspoken histories and divergent understandings of what art should serve. This was no theoretical disagreement about aesthetics; this was fundamental collision of needs—his to create and share, hers to protect and preserve.

She turned to leave, fingers brushing the edge of the canvas like it might burn, might transmit its dangerous visibility through touch alone.

"V," he said, her single-letter name carrying more weight than it should have been able to bear. "Wait."

But she was already moving toward the door, her steps measured but purposeful. She paused at the threshold, silhouetted against the gathering storm outside.

"Co-washing," she said without turning, "is about cleansing without stripping away what's essential."

Then she was gone, leaving Micah alone with her image and the growing awareness that neither of them had mastered that delicate balance yet—how to reveal without exposing, how to connect without consuming, how to honor both art and boundaries in the same breath.

That evening, as promised rain finally arrived with operatic drama, V sat at her small writing desk, journal open before her. Her pen moved with new urgency:

We offer ourselves in fragments, hoping no one assembles the complete picture. But artists see differently—they capture not just what you show, but what you hide. The danger isn't in being seen, but in being revealed.

Chapter 6 -- Heat Damage

The photo wasn't even clear—a casual snapshot never intended as documentation of anything significant. A tourist from Toronto had wandered into the gallery during a soft opening, glass of complimentary rum punch in hand, and snapped a picture of Micah's artwork to share with friends back home. In the reflection of the

glass frame that protected the painting—blurred, incidental, merely atmospheric background—was a woman in a summer hat, hands raised to cover the lower half of her face as if caught mid-thought or mid-protest.

But the braid pattern was unmistakable to those who knew to look for it. The precise curve of her scarf as it framed her face. The way her fingers were held, not in casual gesture but deliberate shield, as if protecting something sacred from exposure.

Online, where algorithms fed on both certainty and speculation with equal hunger, it took less than forty-eight hours to circulate beyond the tourist's modest circle of followers.

'Is this her?' the caption read when reposted by a literary blog with thirty thousand subscribers.

No name. No confirmation. But whispers have never required proof to grow teeth, to pierce flesh, to draw blood. Speculation alone was enough to summon the ghosts of a past V had deliberately left behind.

Micah saw the image before she did. He deleted it from the gallery's social media account where the tourist had tagged them. Called the visitor, voice urgent as he begged them to remove the original post. But it was already in the algorithm's bloodstream, multiplying through shares and reposts, gaining momentum as it reached audiences hungry for gossip about a writer who

had disappeared from public view at the height of her success.

When he finally told her, standing on the small porch of her guest house as dawn broke over the island, V went still with the particular stillness of prey who understand that movement attracts predators.

"You knew," she said after a long silence. Not an accusation, but a realization.

"I knew you were someone," Micah admitted. "I didn't know exactly who until the post started circulating. I didn't expect it to spread like this."

"But you painted me," she said, each word precise and heavy. "You captured enough of me that strangers could recognize what I've spent months concealing."

He didn't answer. The silence answered for him, acknowledging what words would only inadequately express—that art creates its own imperative, that beauty demands witness even when that witnessing brings consequences.

She closed her eyes and sat down on the porch steps, suddenly looking smaller, as if something essential had been extracted from her very structure. Her hand went to her scalp instinctively—checking the tightness of her braids, like they were the only thing holding her together in this moment of unraveling.

"Take it down," she said finally. "All of it. The painting. The post. Whatever else is out there."

"It's art, V," Micah said, the conflict evident in his voice. "It matters."

"It's my face," she countered, looking up at him with eyes that held both fury and fear. "My life that will be disrupted when they find me. My peace that will shatter when they start asking questions I came here to escape."

Micah hesitated, caught between creative integrity and human compassion. "Then let's talk about this. Really talk. Don't leave like this."

A flicker of surprise crossed her features. "I won't leave," she said, voice breaking slightly on the admission. "But I'm asking. Please."

He nodded once, the gesture both promise and concession. Without another word, he turned and walked back toward his gallery, where decisions waited that would test his understanding of what art should serve and at what cost.

He looked at the painting for a long time after securing it in his private workspace, away from public view. The woman on canvas stared back at him—confident, composed, complexity written into every brushstroke. So different from the vulnerable figure he'd left sitting on worn porch steps, fingers pressed against her scalp as if checking for damage.

Heat damage, she had once explained to a journalist who asked about her natural hair journey, was what happened when you applied too much heat without proper protection—irreversible breakdown that changed the very structure of what you were trying to enhance.

As Micah covered the canvas with a cloth, he finally understood the metaphor extended far beyond hair—to privacy violated, to trust damaged, to safety compromised in the name of beauty or truth or art. Some damage, once done, could not simply be conditioned away.

Meanwhile, across the island, a journalist named Jordan Chen opened his laptop to find seventeen messages about a possible sighting of the elusive Simone Vaughn—literary darling turned recluse, whose sudden disappearance from public life had spawned a thousand theories but no confirmed facts.

He booked a flight to Dominica before finishing his morning coffee.

Chapter 7 -- Protective Style

The gallery closed without explanation. A handwritten sign appeared on the door—"Temporarily closed for renovation"—though no construction sounds emerged from within. Locals exchanged theories, but none approached Micah directly. On an island where privacy

was respected as essential rather than optional, questions remained unasked.

V retreated into careful patterns. She shopped earlier, walked different routes, added a pair of oversized sunglasses to her already protective ensemble. Her braids—once worn proudly exposed—remained covered at all times, wrapped in scarves of increasing opacity.

Micah found her three days after their confrontation, sitting on a secluded stretch of black sand beach where volcanic history met relentless ocean. He approached without pretense, lowering himself onto the sand beside her with enough distance to respect boundaries but close enough for conversation.

"The painting is locked away," he said, watching the horizon rather than her face. "I've contacted everyone who shared the image. Most have taken it down."

V nodded, acknowledging both the effort and its inevitable incompleteness. In a digital age, nothing truly disappeared—it merely submerged, waiting for the right current to bring it back to the surface.

"A journalist arrived yesterday," she said after a long silence. "Jordan Chen. He's made a career of finding people who don't want to be found."

Micah turned to her then, alarm evident in his posture. "How do you know?"

"Elise told me. He came to the salon asking questions." She smiled faintly. "He received exactly zero answers. The women there protect their own."

Relief softened his shoulders, but only briefly. "What will you do?"

V sighed, the sound almost lost beneath the rhythm of waves. "What I've always done. Adapt. Move carefully. Protect what matters."

They sat in silence as afternoon light shifted toward evening gold, casting long shadows across volcanic sand. A pair of frigatebirds wheeled overhead, their distinctive silhouettes dark against the fading blue.

"I understand why you did it," V said finally. "The painting. Artists see what others miss—it's your gift and your burden."

Micah nodded, accepting both recognition and implicit critique.

"But understand this," she continued, her voice finding strength. "I didn't disappear on a whim. It wasn't artistic temperament or publicity stunt. I left because success became a cage—every word I wrote dissected for market potential rather than meaning, every appearance choreographed for maximum engagement, every relationship categorized as either strategic asset or liability."

She turned to face him fully now, removing her sunglasses to meet his gaze directly. "I was producing content, not creation. I was being consumed, not read."

Micah absorbed her words, seeing her for the first time without the filter of his artistic fascination—not as subject but as person, with history and wounds and reasons that extended beyond his canvas.

"I'll help you stay hidden," he said, the decision arriving fully formed. "However you need."

The words hung between them, simple but profound in their commitment.

For the next two weeks, they moved like participants in an elaborate dance of protection. Micah became her eyes in spaces she now avoided—monitoring Jordan Chen's movements through the network of local connections that existed beneath the island's tourist-facing surface. He closed the gallery to public viewing, transforming it instead into a studio where he worked on new pieces that didn't capture her likeness but still honored her influence.

V continued writing in her journal, words flowing with increasing urgency as external pressure mounted. What had begun as scattered observations evolved into something more structured—not memoir, exactly, but a narrative that wove her experiences into something universal, something about identity and expectation and the crown we never choose but learn to wear.

They developed a system: safe places, warning signals, alternative routes. The island—with its hidden coves and dense forest trails—became both refuge and fortress, offering protection through its very geography.

One evening, as sunset painted the coastline in impossible colors, they met at an overlook accessible only by a steep, unmarked path. Micah brought bread and local cheese; V contributed a bottle of rum from a distillery hidden in the island's interior. Their conversation, once careful and measured, had evolved into something approaching honest intimacy.

"Did you know," Micah asked as they watched stars emerge, "that traditional Caribbean head wraps originated as protective style? Not just for the hair itself, but for the knowledge women carried?"

V smiled. "In some traditions, different knots and folds contained messages—warnings, directions, histories. Beauty concealing purpose."

He nodded, offering a piece of bread. "Like your writing?"

The question might have once triggered retreat, but now she considered it thoughtfully.

"Perhaps. I've been thinking about protection versus hiding—how one preserves while the other diminishes." She traced patterns in condensation on the bottle. "A

protective style shields what's valuable against damage while it grows. Hiding is... something else entirely."

"And which are you doing now?" Micah asked gently.

V looked out over the darkening island, considering. "Both. Neither. I'm trying to find the difference."

As night settled fully around them, their conversation turned practical again—Jordan Chen had been seen at the port asking questions about artists and galleries. His persistence suggested he had more than casual interest in confirming his suspicions about V's presence on the island.

"We need to be more careful," Micah concluded. "At least until he gives up and leaves."

V nodded, but something in her expression had shifted—less fear now, more calculation. "Or until I decide what I'm ready to share, and what remains mine alone."

They descended the path in darkness, flashlights illuminating just enough ground to navigate safely. The metaphor wasn't lost on either of them—how much light was necessary, how much darkness remained protective, how to find balance between visibility and safety.

Back in her room, V wrote late into the night, her pen moving with newfound conviction:

A protective style isn't permanent—it's transitional, a space between what was and what will be. Perhaps that's what this island has been for me. Not an ending, but a transition. Not escape, but preparation.

Outside her window, the island continued its ancient conversation with the sea, indifferent to human dramas yet somehow making space for them all the same.

The Crown We Never Chose

By S. V. Wray

Chapter 8 -- Protective Style

The island wrapped itself around V like silk thread woven through history—gentle yet unbreakable, yielding yet persistent. Unlike New York's perpetual spotlight or London's ravenous literary circles, Dominica didn't demand explanations for sudden absences or changed routines. It simply kept offering quiet corners, hidden paths, spaces where breathing happened without documentation.

V withdrew from the patterns she'd established. No gallery visits. No morning walks along the market's edge. No answering glances across busy plazas. Her world contracted to essential movements, like a manuscript edited to its most potent form, everything extraneous removed.

She spent her afternoons exploring back roads where tourists rarely ventured, discovering tiny community libraries tucked between homes, sitting beneath ancient mango trees whose fruit fell with satisfying thuds around her—spaces where no one cared who she used to be or what books carried her name on their spines. In these pockets of anonymity, her journal filled slowly but steadily, words accumulating like rainwater in cisterns—not rushed but inevitable.

While her pen moved deliberately across the page, her thoughts arrived with surprising velocity—memories cascading through neural pathways long undisturbed. She remembered women pressing hair before school, hot combs sizzling like secrets being whispered too close to flames. Afternoons watching her mother transform the kitchen into an alchemist's laboratory, mixing avocados, honey, and prayer into conditioners that smelled like inheritance. The first time she'd worn braids to a literary event and watched white critics search for words to describe them without revealing their discomfort with difference.

Micah stayed away, mostly—respecting the boundaries she'd established without requiring her to articulate them repeatedly. When they crossed paths, it was accidental and brief, an exchange of nods containing more meaning than casual observers could detect. No conversations, no lingering glances, just mutual acknowledgment that existed outside of language.

But the island noticed their separation with the quiet attention of a community that communicated through subtlety rather than declaration. Old women in markets pressed extra sprigs of thyme into her palm when she purchased vegetables, the herbs' scent releasing when crushed between fingers—protection, resilience, healing. Teenage girls observed her braids with something like reverence when she passed, recognizing not celebrity but a woman who carried her crown with both pride and caution. She was becoming part of the fabric, stitch by stitch, absorbed into Dominica's tapestry not as tourist or fugitive but as something between—a temporary fixture granted permanence through acceptance.

One evening, as sunset painted the hills in amber and gold, she caught sight of Micah slipping out of the gallery, a canvas wrapped in cloth tucked carefully under his arm. He moved with purpose, eyes focused on the path ahead rather than his surroundings. He didn't see her standing in the shadow of a flamboyant tree, and she didn't call out.

Instead, she turned down a narrow path she hadn't explored before, drawn by some instinct that operated beyond conscious decision. The trail wound upward, challenging but not punishing, until it opened onto a ridge where the Caribbean spread before her like a declaration of infinity. The wind pulled gently at her scarf, curious but respectful, testing but never attempting to claim.

She sat on a stone worn smooth by other bodies seeking the same vista and opened her journal. For hours, she wrote as daylight faded and stars emerged, ivory paper glowing faintly in the rising moonlight. The words weren't urgent or desperate—they had moved beyond the feverish pace of deadline writing, beyond the performative brilliance of literary darling, beyond the calculated provocations that had built her career.

They were simply true.

They told the story of a woman who had braided silence into safety, who had walked away from noise not in defeat but in preservation, who had wrapped herself in softness not to hide but to heal—a narrative that honored both vulnerability and strength without forcing false resolution. The pages filled with reflections on visibility and obscurity, on being seen versus being consumed, on the privilege of choosing when to speak and when to listen.

"Protective style," she'd once explained to an eager fan at a signing event, "isn't just about braids or twists or wraps. It's about choosing what deserves your exposure—and what doesn't. It's about distinguishing between sharing and surrendering."

In the quiet of Dominica's hills, she was finally practicing what she had once only preached—learning the difference between protection and hiding, between private and secret, between withdrawal and disappearance. The distinction was subtle but crucial,

like the difference between a period and a semicolon; one ended things completely, the other suggested continuation.

When she finally descended back to her lodging, the pages of her journal heavy with truth rather than performance, she understood something that had eluded her throughout her literary career: some stories weren't meant for everyone. Some belonged only to those who had earned the right to receive them, who approached with reverence rather than entitlement.

And some belonged only to herself—at least for now.

Chapter 9 -- Crowned in Silence

The trail to the heritage site wasn't marked on tourist maps or identified with government signage. It existed in local knowledge, passed through generations like recipes or healing remedies—information that belonged to the community rather than visitors. Yet somehow, both V and Micah found themselves drawn to the same sacred space as sunset approached, arriving within moments of each other as if responding to an invitation neither had consciously received.

The ancient site—stone foundations of a settlement that had existed before colonial powers redrew maps like children claiming ownership of clouds—offered a view that stretched past emerald hills into an endless expanse of blue, the kind of blue that dared you to carry grief into

it and challenged you to return with anything but wonder. V arrived first, settling on a flat stone worn smooth by centuries of similar contemplation. Micah followed moments later, his footsteps slowing when he recognized her silhouette against the darkening sky.

He paused, clearly considering retreat, before deliberately choosing a spot a respectful distance away—close enough for conversation but maintaining the boundary her silence had established. For several minutes, neither spoke, allowing the island's dusk symphony to fill the space between them: distant waves, night insects beginning their chorus, breeze rustling through vegetation that had witnessed centuries of human drama with botanical indifference.

"It's quiet," he said finally, the words emerging soft as prayer.

"Finally," she replied, the simple response containing layers of meaning—acknowledgment of the weeks of strategic avoidance, of Jordan Chen's recent departure from the island, of the internal noise that had finally begun to settle within her own mind.

They didn't speak for a long while after that exchange, content to watch the sky transition through its gradient of colors—amber to lavender to deepening indigo, stars emerging like thoughts that had always existed but only became visible in darkness. The silence between them had transformed from awkward to companionable, from barrier to shared language.

Then Micah spoke, his voice directed partly to the horizon, as if confessing to the island itself: "I've never wanted to leave this place more than when you came."

V turned toward him slowly, surprise evident in the subtle shift of her posture. "Because of me?"

"Because you made stillness feel like a beginning instead of an ending," he explained, his gaze still fixed on the distant meeting of sea and sky. "I've been content here for years, making art that captures what most people miss. But watching you—your careful navigation, your deliberate silence, your way of seeing beneath surfaces—it reminded me there are other kinds of stillness waiting elsewhere."

His words carried no expectation, no demand, just honest recognition of how her presence had disrupted his comfortable patterns. They revealed vulnerability without weaponizing it, offering truth without requiring reciprocation.

V closed her eyes, not to block him out but to prevent herself from falling too deeply into the potential his words created—the dangerous possibility of connection beyond the careful boundaries she'd established. She had come to Dominica for solitude, not relationship; for healing, not new attachments that would demand pieces of herself she was still reclaiming.

"I wanted to stay longer," she whispered, the admission emerging from some unexpected wellspring of honesty. "But I know better now."

Micah didn't reach for her, didn't try to bridge the physical space between them. He simply sat, heart visibly open but hands folded in his lap, respecting the boundary even as emotion moved visibly across his features. "Will I see you again?"

The question contained no demand, just quiet hope tempered by acceptance of whatever answer she might give.

V stood, her movement deliberate as ritual. The evening breeze caught her scarf, lifting it momentarily like a banner between them—both connection and separation, both bridge and boundary. Against the darkening sky, her silhouette seemed crowned by both stars and shadow.

"In a different way," she said, the words neither promise nor rejection but something more nuanced—acknowledgment that connections transcend physical presence, that some influences remain even after departures.

Then she walked away—not fleeing but proceeding with purpose, each step measured and certain. She didn't look back, understanding that some goodbyes require complete commitment to maintain their integrity. Some endings demand clean lines to permit new beginnings.

When Micah returned to his gallery the following morning, having spent the night in contemplation at the heritage site, he found precisely what he both expected and dreaded: absence. V had departed without grand announcement, without explanatory note, without formal farewell. Only stillness remained where there had once been warmth, emptiness where possibility had briefly flourished.

Yet somehow, the absence felt less like abandonment than completion—a story that had reached its natural conclusion rather than been abruptly truncated. Some crowns aren't worn publicly like monarchs demanding recognition. They're carried internally, their weight distributed across the skeleton, their significance evident not in declaration but in posture, in movement, in the quiet dignity of chosen silence.

And V's crown had always been crafted from that particular silence—the power of words withheld until they could emerge with perfect intention, the strength of boundaries established not through confrontation but through graceful departure.

As the island continued its ancient conversation with the sea, Micah understood that what had passed between them was complete in its incompletion—a story that honored its characters precisely by refusing to force resolution where organic conclusion had already occurred.

Chapter 10 -- Edge Control

The gallery reopened the next day without fanfare or announcement. Micah simply unlocked the doors at the usual hour, allowing morning light to stream through windows that had remained shuttered during his brief, self-imposed isolation. He moved through the familiar space with renewed purpose, adjusting frames with fractional precision, allowing sunlight to illuminate each piece differently as the hours passed—not static displays but living works that changed with the day's progression.

With particular care, he hung a new painting alone on the central wall—not surrounded by explanatory text or positioned within thematic exhibition, just one canvas centered perfectly where the afternoon light would strike it most directly. The piece demanded no attention yet commanded complete focus once observed.

The background featured a complex interplay of deep blues and rich ochres, brushstrokes that curved and tangled like waves meeting shoreline, like curls defying gravity. In the middle stood a silhouette—not quite woman, not quite metaphor, existing in that liminal space between representation and suggestion. Her outline glowed faintly, head lifted toward something beyond the frame's boundaries. No face, no identifiable features, nothing that could be claimed or recognized.

He titled it simply: *Venus Unfound*.

Below the canvas, in careful hand-inked script rather than standard gallery typography, the placard contained just five words:

"She was never yours to find."

The statement functioned simultaneously as artistic declaration, as boundary assertion, and as quiet rebuke to those who believed beauty existed primarily for their consumption rather than its own inherent purpose.

Jordan Chen arrived shortly before noon, pushing through the gallery door with the practiced confidence of someone accustomed to accessing spaces regardless of whether he'd been invited. His eyes scanned the room with professional assessment, cataloging changes, seeking patterns, hunting significance with the finely-honed instinct of a journalist who had built his reputation on revealing what others preferred to conceal.

He paused briefly before the new painting, head tilted slightly as he absorbed its composition. "New?" he asked, the casual question belying the intensity of his scrutiny.

Micah shrugged, deliberately casual while watching Chen's reaction from his peripheral vision. "Sort of."

The journalist stepped closer, eyes narrowed as if trying to extract some hidden meaning, some concealed identity, some confirmation of the suspicions that had brought him to Dominica. "Pretty," he concluded finally,

the faint disappointment in his tone revealing his failure to find what he sought. "Doesn't look like anyone in particular."

"Doesn't have to," Micah replied, already turning away to attend to another customer—the conversation dismissed as firmly as Jordan's unspoken agenda.

The journalist lingered another twenty minutes, circling the gallery with diminishing interest, before finally departing without further questions. He caught the next boat departing the island, his investigation yielding no exclusive, no revelation, no career-advancing scoop. His departure carried no drama, generated no ripples in the community—just another visitor who had come and gone without leaving permanent impression.

After closing time, Micah moved through the quieted space, sweeping floors and straightening displays with the meditative focus of someone who understood that maintenance was its own form of creation. As he bent to retrieve a fallen pencil near the reception desk, he noticed something half-concealed beneath the gallery's guestbook—a package wrapped in linen, secured with twine rather than tape, its presence deliberate yet unannounced.

No note accompanied it. No explanation. No instruction. Just a manuscript bound in simple cloth, its title hand-lettered on the cover:

The Crown We Never Chose by S. V. Wray.

He held the bundle for a long moment, its weight both physical and symbolic in his hands. Then, with great care bordering on reverence, he placed it behind the desk drawer—not for sale, not for display, not for sharing with curious visitors. Just kept. Preserved. Honored in its existence without being exploited for its meaning.

Some stories aren't meant to be claimed or publicized or marketed. They aren't designed for bestseller lists or literary prize podiums or book club dissection. They exist simply to be witnessed, to be acknowledged by those who understand their value lies not in commercial potential but in the truth they contain.

As Micah locked the gallery that evening, the manuscript secured in darkness that protected rather than obscured, he understood something fundamental about both art and relationship: the most profound connections often left no visible evidence, no public record, no external validation. They existed in changed perspectives, in new questions, in the subtle recalibration of how one moved through the world afterward.

V had left Dominica, but her influence remained—not in publicity or profit but in the quiet transformation of those she had touched with both her presence and her departure.

Epilogue -- Twist Out

The tea was already steeped and fragrant when V arrived, tendrils of steam rising from a delicate ceramic pot positioned center of a small table. Veronica sat at the edge of the veranda, one leg elegantly crossed over the other, a linen wrap draped with studied casualness over one shoulder. Her eyes scanned the waves breaking against volcanic shoreline as if they contained messages coded specifically for her interpretation, narratives waiting to be extracted by those who understood how to read natural rhythm.

She didn't rise when V approached, just lifted a perfectly shaped eyebrow and slid the second teacup closer with manicured fingers that betrayed her professional origins despite her current casual appearance.

"I thought you might've vanished for good," Veronica said, her tone balancing between observation and accusation. "Disappeared into whatever mysterious ether consumes writers who stop publishing."

"Almost did," V replied, settling into the chair opposite with the careful grace of someone who had learned to navigate spaces without disturbing their existing energy. "But I ran into a librarian who recognized me despite my best efforts at anonymity."

Veronica's lips curved into a knowing smirk, her eyes reflecting calculation beneath apparent amusement. "The

one with the husband who can't stop talking about his book club even when no one's asked?"

V raised a brow in silent confirmation. "So you've seen them, too."

They didn't say the names directly—Katherine Chen and Clint Burnett—maintaining the delicate fiction that their prior connections remained their private knowledge rather than shared history. Some recognitions were best left unspoken, particularly among those who understood the value of strategic silence.

Veronica poured amber liquid into both cups with practiced precision, the gesture revealing years of experience entertaining in contexts far more formal than this island meeting. "I also saw someone else recently. Silver hair now, though it suits him. Still charming in that dangerous way that makes you forget he's calculating every response. Still dangerous in that charming way that makes you forgive the calculation."

V looked down into her teacup, watching ripples settle into stillness. "Sebastián."

The name wasn't a question but a recognition, requiring no confirmation yet receiving Veronica's slight nod regardless.

"He asked about you," Veronica continued, studying V's expression with professional assessment. "I said nothing, of course."

"I know," V replied, meeting her gaze directly now. "Thank you."

They sat in momentary silence, the space between them filled with unspoken understanding of shared experience—both women had navigated the treacherous waters of publishing celebrity, had experienced the particular exhaustion of maintaining public personas that simultaneously revealed and concealed, had ultimately chosen different forms of escape from industries that had simultaneously celebrated and consumed them.

The ocean provided rhythmic accompaniment to their silence, waves marking time without hurrying its passage.

"You writing again?" Veronica asked finally, the casual question belying its significance—for writers of their caliber, creation wasn't merely occupation but essential expression of self.

V hesitated, fingers tracing the rim of her teacup. "Yes," she admitted. "Something about braids and becoming. About what stays coiled within us, even after we leave the places that shaped those patterns. About the crowns we never chose but learned to carry."

Veronica smiled, genuine warmth replacing her practiced charm. "I wrote something, too. Set in a salon on a different island. Young love, mild chaos, unexpected connections. It's commercial fluff compared to my previous work—critics would probably call it a

disappointing departure. But it's entirely mine in a way my bestsellers never were."

They shared a moment of recognition—both understanding how liberation sometimes required walking away from expectations, even (perhaps especially) expectations of brilliance and significance.

V reached into her bag and withdrew a small slip of paper, passing it across the table with deliberate movement. "Third island. Next week."

Veronica accepted the note, glancing at its contents before tucking it into her pocket. "Just us?"

"Three of us," V replied, the simple clarification containing volumes of implication. "One more goodbye to complete the circle."

Veronica didn't ask who the third person would be. She already knew—just as she understood why this final meeting mattered, why some endings required witnesses, why some chapters needed formal closure before new narratives could properly begin.

The afternoon breeze strengthened momentarily, catching the corner of V's scarf and lifting it in gentle rebellion before settling it back against her shoulder—nature's subtle reminder of both freedom and belonging, of how fabric both covered and adorned depending on intention.

When they eventually parted, they didn't exchange formal goodbyes or promises of future contact. Those conventions belonged to a world they had both deliberately left behind—a reality where relationships required constant maintenance through empty assurances and performative connection.

Instead, they simply finished their tea with unhurried appreciation, like women who had learned through experience to savor moments of genuine peace—women who understood the bittersweet taste of endings and still chose softness over spectacle, authentic completion over dramatic finale.

As V walked away, the manuscript of *The Crown We Never Chose* completed and delivered, three islands visited and three separate pieces of herself reclaimed, she felt the curious lightness that comes from carrying what truly belongs to you rather than what others have placed upon your shoulders.

The story had found its proper conclusion—not in marketable resolution or satisfying finality, but in the open-ended possibility that only authenticity permits. Like a twist-out that releases tight coils into expanded form, revealing patterns that existed all along but needed freedom to fully express themselves.

She had arrived on Dominica seeking disappearance but departed having found something far more valuable: the courage to be visible on her own terms, the wisdom to

distinguish between privacy and shame, the strength to carry her crown with both humility and pride.

The wind caught her scarf one final time as she boarded the departing ferry—not claiming it but simply acknowledging its presence, like a reader who respects a story enough to let it remain perfectly, beautifully incomplete.

Published Notice

This edition is provided freely by Margins Abound LLC as part of its cultural archive series.

If this story resonates with you, you're encouraged to explore more works by SV Ray (a pen name for a Rating Game Book Series character) in the future.

This file was first archived on Archive.org by Margins Abound LLC.